

You must understand venison to be able to cook it successfully

By Bill Palmroth

Venison, the collective term for the meat of all hoofed big game animals including deer, elk, antelope, and even bighorn sheep, differs from domestic meats in some important ways. Understanding these differences will be an important factor in your successes or failures as a chef.

When using domestic meats like beef and pork, one has some assurances that the animal was probably fed no strongly flavored foods, was fattened well, aged correctly, and even limited in exercise. Venison offers none of these promises. If cared for like domestic meat (and it should be) after the kill, however, it also should be excellent.

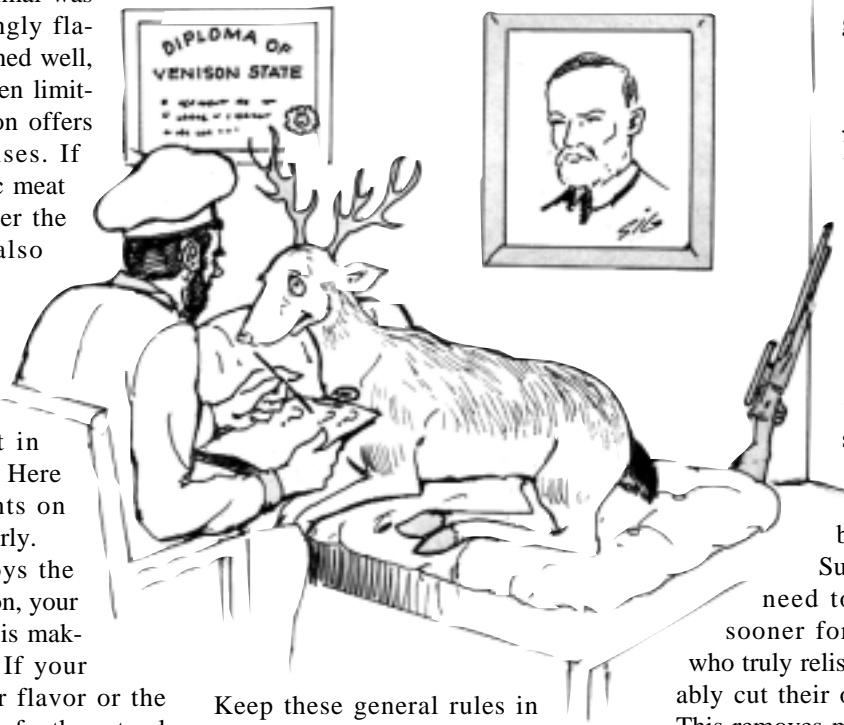
The effect of a different lifestyle on the meat of big game must be considered when substituting it in your favorite recipes. Here are some helpful hints on how to prepare it properly.

If your family enjoys the natural flavor of venison, your only cooking problem is making the meat tender. If your animal has a stronger flavor or the folks at home do not prefer the natural venison taste, you may increase their enjoyment of these meats in three ways:

- Disguise the flavor with spices, herbs, or seasonings. Recipes with barbecue sauces, soy sauce, and marinades will help this effort.
- Dilute the flavor by mixing venison with other meats and vegetables in stews, soups, and hamburger dishes.

- Overwhelm the family by serving venison in so many ways that they learn to like it.

Most cooks like to try new recipes now and then and even make up some of their own. Be reasonable. Expect some limited successes and maybe even a failure or two when experimenting with venison. Write some notes to yourself when you hit on a combination the family really enjoys.



Keep these general rules in mind for successful venison cookery:

- Don't overcook. Venison, especially deer, has short fibers that toughen quickly. Overcooking or using very high temperature leads to tough meat. Serve venison about medium-well, never rare or very well done.
- Most venison has little fat and in this way only corresponds to low-quality beef. Take this into consideration when cooking. Tender cuts like

loin or tenderloin can be broiled or cooked on the charcoal grill. Less tender cuts like round are best cooked with moist heat—i.e., stewing or potroasting.

- With little fat, venison is a dry meat. Efforts must be made to preserve moisture. Wrapping in foil, using a cooking bag, or covering with bacon strips will help.

- Remove any venison fat before cooking. This seems like a contradiction since the meat is normally low in fat, but any game flavor will be most pronounced in the fat. Substitute beef or pork fat if needed.

- Use acid to tenderize. Vinegar, tomato sauce, and french dressing sauces are good possibilities. Crushed papaya fruit also will do a suitable job of tenderizing. Meat should be marinated in the chosen sauce at least 24 hours. Venison treated this way may be broiled or charcoaled.

- Venison generally is sweeter than domestic meats. Reduce sugar by one-fourth in sauce recipes originally developed for beef or pork.

Successful cooking may need to start several steps sooner for best results. Those who truly relish good venison invariably cut their own by boning it out. This removes much of the tough connective tissues, leaving straight-grained muscle for steaks and roasts. The following recipes are based on boned-out meat. If someone else cut the meat, it is a simple task to remove any bone before trying one of these old favorites.

Panfried venison:

One of the oldest and probably still the best ways to serve venison is quick

frying of thin steaks. Cut thin steaks from the loin, sirloin, or round $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch thick. Flour or bread lightly. Quick fry in a sizzling hot skillet not over $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes per side. Season with salt and serve hot. Use cooking oil, butter, bacon grease, or beef suet for shortening. Frying time is critical. Meat should be brown outside and gray or just a hint of pink in the middle. If steak is dry or tough, it was overcooked. Leavings in the skillet make good pan gravy.

Venison roast:

Another method that preserves moisture is cooking in foil. Lay out a thawed roast on a sheet of foil large enough for double wrapping. Sprinkle with one package of dehydrated vegetable soup mix. Roll the roast in the mix until as much of the dry soup as possible is coating the roast's surface. Wrap tightly in the foil and place in the oven preheated to 350 degrees. Depending on how well done you like your venison, cook the average 2 to 3-pound roast $1\frac{1}{2}$ to $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours. The dry soup mix provides salt and seasoning; the meat will come out moist and juicy.

Crock pot venison:

Cut steak-sized portions $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch thick. Brown approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of these in a skillet and place in the bottom of the average 3 to 4-quart crock pot. Cover with a can of cream of mushroom soup thinned with up to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup milk. Top with 2 tablespoons of butter. Peel or scrub 6 small to medium potatoes and place them on top of the meat and soup. Finish filling the crock pot with uncooked chunks of squash or similar form of vegetable. Set on low and forget for 8 to 10 hours. If you do this after breakfast in the morning, supper will be ready and waiting with no further effort. The meat will be tender and the soup will have formed a delightful gravy for the potatoes. Δ